

We need our HUGS, seniors say Kitchener project brings friendship, security to those living alone

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Author: Frank Etherington

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Freda Bassett and Angus Meldrum needed a hug.

The Kitchener seniors are now getting that physical contact, as well as emotional and practical support, from a project called Helpers Using Group Support, or HUGS.

HUGS has proved so successful in Kitchener-Waterloo, organizers want to expand the pilot project to serve seniors across Waterloo Region.

Freda, 71, and Angus, 73, are two of 11 people taking part in HUGS. The program organizes family members, friends and professionals into support groups that try to meet the many needs of isolated seniors, said facilitator Alison Sanders of Cambridge.

HUGS groups include from three to 10 members who provide a variety of services for seniors that sometimes include protection from unscrupulous sales-people and fraud.

In Freda's case, HUGS was too late to protect her from a vacuum-cleaner salesman who sold her a \$2,000 product she didn't need, but members subsequently intervened to scare off four other salesmen who tried to con her into buying additional vacuum cleaners.

And, in a case that involved an 89-year-old Kitchener widow, HUGS threatened legal action against a relative who removed \$6,000 from the woman's bank account. The money, plus interest, was repaid.

At a recent meeting between Freda and some members of her HUGS group, she was asked what she got from the program.

"Friendship and company," she said. "You try sitting on your own for a long while."

Not that she's really alone -- she has two cats and Pixie, her pet hedgehog.

Freda, who has needed a variety of help since her husband, Bill, died in 1996, said she looks forward to occasional visits from her five to eight group members and regular HUGS group meetings that become social events at her Kitchener home.

She had a son who died "long ago" in England and a daughter she hasn't seen for several years. She also has grandchildren but, because of family problems, said she hasn't seen them for some time.

Group member Ken Bisch said he first met Freda through activities at their Kitchener church.

HUGS helped Freda sort out various financial and legal issues. Group members are also there when she's depressed and wants to talk, or needs a ride to go to medical appointments and buy groceries.

"There are many senior citizens out there who don't have family and are alone, isolated and vulnerable," Bisch said. "They need someone to help them. . . ."

Angus, the former soccer player and referee, is one such person.

On a grey winter day at a Kitchener walkup apartment, he meets with a HUGS group that includes one his five sons. While attending local university courses, that son is sharing Angus's apartment.

Angus has Parkinson's disease and a heart condition but clings tenaciously to his independence.

Eyes sparkling, he looks like he's dreaming about the game he loves and maybe the goal that got away as group members ask about the possibility he may need surgery for a hernia or how he's managing to prepare some of his meals in his new slow cooker.

He makes certain group members know he wants to live in an area of the city where he can watch soccer when he moves this summer to a ground-floor apartment so he doesn't have to worry about steps.

Sanders and group members Mary Harrison, RAISE Home Support Service for the Elderly co-ordinator, and Arlene Fillmore, Red Cross supervisor, promise to do their best but remind Angus that, because of his health, he needs to live near local services rather than the outskirts of the city.

When asked if there's anything else he needs, Angus is more than ready for the question.

"Get me a new bloody heart," he said.

Angus, who has been divorced for many years, said HUGS helped him move into his apartment and buy used furniture and arranged visits by homemakers and an occupational therapist.

"The group helped me get out of a retirement home that I couldn't stand," he said. "I was horrified to see so many people in there dying around me. . . . I'm not ready for that."

He said he now looks forward to the HUGS meetings at his apartment.

"Trouble is, no one ever brings a bottle," he said.

Once it's decided to form a HUGS cluster, Sanders said the senior involved selects people he or she wants in the group and regular meetings are then held at the elderly person's home.

Formed in 1997, HUGS is supported by RAISE and the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services, an independent, non-profit organization in Kitchener that evaluates projects for government and agencies.

HUGS was financed by a \$42,000 grant from the Trillium Foundation -- a provincial group using lottery profits to support community programs.

Seniors are referred to HUGS by various agencies for many reasons.

These include ill health, depression, isolation, stroke recovery, abuse or family problems. Sometimes, HUGS helps a senior move out of an institution and return to independent living.

Numerous social agencies are involved with HUGS along with lawyers, health services and hospitals. Other social services available to seniors are often co-ordinated by a HUGS group and represented at HUGS meetings.

In some cases the program helps seniors when there is little or no family support. In others, links are made to family members who live a distance away so they can be part of the group and any decisions that have to be made about the senior's life.

Sanders said the program was originally developed about 10 years ago to help Ontario families who had children with developmental disabilities and mental health problems.

She said people who get involved with HUGS groups quickly consider the seniors among their best friends.

"They're certainly very important to me, (and) that's why we always finish off meetings in a warm way" she said.

"We always end with a hug."

[Illustration]

Caption: Rick Koza, Record staff Angus Meldrum (centre) is surrounded by a few of the people who help him live independently in his Kitchener apartment (left to right): Alison Sanders of HUGS, Mary Harrison of RAISE and Arlene Fillmore of the Red Cross.

Credit: Record staff

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